

SEPTEMBER 2021

YESS NEWSLETTER

MESSAGE FROM MARGO



Hello everyone, and welcome to our September Newsletter,

This month has been mixed with the joyful celebration of the 40th Anniversary of our incorporation on September 1, 1981, and the increased complexity and precautions needed to manage the fourth wave of COVID-19. As usual, the team at YESS has done an incredible job of balancing crisis management, remembering and grieving lost clients and community members, and planning for what's needed next.

They are tired, they are sad, and they are incredible professionals who continue to show up and make a difference to the hundreds of young

people in our care. In this edition, you will hear from YESS' Spirits of Past (Jessica Day, Director of Programs, on what has changed at YESS over the years), Present (Marcia East, Trauma Practitioner, on what young people are currently dealing with), and Future (Tessa Mulcair, Manager of Shelters, on what is needed to serve young people in the city and what's next at YESS).

YESS couldn't have made it to 40 without all of the hard work, financial help, and support from people like you, reader. We are so grateful to be part of such an incredible, compassionate community.

Please join us as we (in true 40-year-old style) take all year to CELEBRATE OUR YOUTH.

A LOOK AT THE PAST

by Jessica Day, Director of Program Innovation

Jessica Day, Director of Program Innovation, has been working with vulnerable populations since obtaining her BA in Psychology from the University of Alberta in 2004. Jessica spent the early days of her career working in a variety of group care settings focusing on high-risk children and youth with complex cases. Her work often involved clients who had experienced extreme family violence and sexual

abuse. When Jessica joined the YESS family in 2016, she focused on becoming a certified Trauma and Compassion Fatigue Practitioner to fully understand the trauma journeys of youth and staff. Jessica brings a wealth of experience and deep understanding of the complex needs of the most vulnerable youth.

When you asked me to look back to when I first started in this field, I was shocked to think it's been over 20 years. Time flies when you are helping humans to grow and develop, as any parent will tell you. What I do remember from my first days in group care, was the battle between my educated ego and my lack of experience and how all first-time workers feel. We feel smart and understanding of other human behaviour, having educated ourselves on the psychology and sociology behind how to work with youth at risk, children in care or transitioning youth to adulthood. We have this profound sense of ego that we know all the tools and techniques to help kids and



change the system for the better. We are smart and we are going to save lives and change the world! And then we are hit with

what the real experiences of working with youth are like and that is when the real work actually begins.

They say knowledge is power, however trying to explain the hierarchy of needs to an escalated youth resulted in a chair being thrown at my head and my life being threatened in the first 30 minutes of being on shift. I wasn't actually in any danger; the youth was escalated because I gave them space and fuel to be escalated and when the adrenaline wore off, so did the threat. I can remember, clearly, the process of writing about this incident in the handwritten logbook and shaping the narrative of

what happened out of fear of my job being questioned or to prove I was a youth worker, and less about the facts of what was done. Why? Because I was afraid: of the youth, of another escalated situation I couldn't handle, and for my job.

I bring this up not because I am a bad youth worker (although they say that those who can't do, teach or lead!), or to indicate that this business is scary. My point here is that, back in the day, we often operated and communicated out of fear. Sometimes it was the fear of the unknown, sometimes it was the fear of action, sometimes it was the fear of our careers. Policies and procedures were reactive written laws in the homes; however, they didn't allow for the many grey scenarios that came up. This led to a need for someone else to tell us what to do, how to act, what is expected. This fear and this structure meant that proactive problem-solving and proactive innovations were not heard or utilized.

As I grew older and moved up the systemic hierarchy to have positions of decision making, responsibility, and leadership, I realized that the system was structured in a way that protected youth rights but also agency liabilities. There was very little support or engagement with the frontline staff and there was nothing close to interactive feedback on changes or ideas. Youth workers were almost dispensable and expected to follow along. It was a difficult time because it tied the hands of the workers who were directly trying to impact the lives of youth and it made this human process very bureaucratic. Burn out, lack of change or impact with the youth, and even staff turn over were the biggest frustrations in the system. We didn't talk about the reasons why a youth was in service—we spoke of their behaviours and escalations. We didn't talk about family relations, unless specifically designated to family reunification. We had strict goals for the youth, dictated by the government or guardians, that the youth had to comply with but didn't get a voice in. Staff were injured and held accountable for serious ethical violations, without any support or understanding or compassion.

The biggest evolution I have seen is that there is a collective understanding that our system needed to evolve and change. We couldn't keep operating out of fear of the youth and their history, we had to look at them as wholistic human beings who were hurt. Agencies started to understand that they needed to support their staff and look at their skills and capacities with intention and purpose. Engagement at all levels

became important; youth, staff, and leaders all had perspectives and they all needed to be heard in order to form a policy. There was a shift in how we educate our staff, understanding that we need more than book knowledge to develop into youth workers; onsite placements increased in availability and length of time. Access to practicing skills, with support, became necessary for our youth workers. Trainings became more than a task that was checked off for accreditation; it became necessary to evolve and grow our capacities and update our knowledge and practice of tools to help.

We also started to hear and understand the word trauma and research into the brain science behind trauma and youth development became necessary. Science was telling us about the healthy trajectory of youth and comparing it to the developmental trajectory of youth who experienced trauma, and this opened up the scope of understanding the youth's behaviours and escalations. It wasn't willful disobedience that we needed to fear. There were needs not being met, survival skills protecting against more trauma, and developmental delays that require different approaches. We also started seeing the youth as individual humans with complex needs and goals. The language in the group homes and the policies and the history of the youth all changed to be more trauma-focused and including more context and humanity. The youth were no longer dangerous, scary, and evil people—they were scared, traumatized, and hurt kids who were locked in a survival mode.

The youth were no longer dangerous, scary, and evil people—they were scared, traumatized, and hurt kids who were locked in a survival mode.

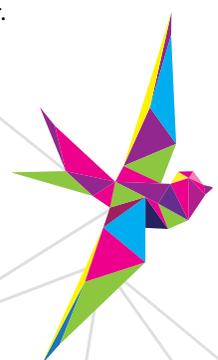
Understanding this meant that we focused, as a system, on building relationships with the youth. Letting them tell their own stories and experiences, building up trust that we would handle them with care and grow their hope or potential. Youth workers started to get benefits and access to wellness supports that made it so they didn't have to take on more trauma from this job. And our storytelling became more human and solution or growth-focused, rather than based on fear. Staff at all levels understood that feedback was important and necessary to be more effective and efficient with any policy changes. Agencies became teams and youth started to see more success as agencies and families truly collaborated around them.

The best part is that with the system changing and collaborating, we got excited to educate the community. We wanted their help; we were not longer adversaries. Our system staff understood that the community needed to be part of the solutions and part of the discussions and part of the knowledge. We can't do this alone and the community can't support if they aren't walked beside as well. There's a pride and excitement in engaging the community members and partners into collaborating and supporting the youth and it creates an entire city of growth and care.

The ultimate outcome of all this evolution is that the youth journey became healthier and more supported. In the past, youth were names and behaviours, shuffled and moved around according to agency needs, staff fears/narratives, or funding expectations. They were traumatized over and over by broken relationships and lack of trust; trust in themselves, the workers, and the systems. Goals were not met or if they were, it wasn't genuine. Loss and grief for youth and staff were real and stereotypes were large and loud for our youth. With all these changes, the youth are now humans and their journey is one of understanding and empathy and compassion. We are youth-focused, not staff or agency-focused and this means the image of the youth changes. We are protective of their stories and their narratives across systems, within communities and amongst agencies. The youth journey is collaborative and at their pace because we recognize their voice and their knowledge and their pain. We acknowledge that these are their lives and we are here to fully support what

they need, when they need it, however they need it. There is no fear or judgement anymore, only compassion and desire for growth and success. The stigma around youth behaviours is changing

and the stigma around family involvement is changing and moving into more trauma-informed discussions. We know, now, that hurt humans hurt humans. We know that healing is dependant on relationship building and we know that the stakes are high. We are committed to a collective belief that we want to do this work, we need to do this work, and we can only do it when we grow and evolve together.



HOLDING THE PRESENT

An Interview with Marcia East, Trauma Practitioner, Wellness Integration Team

Marcia trained as a psychotherapist with over 20 years' experience working with youth and their families, five years of which has been spent in Edmonton working with youth who are homeless. She is motivated by her love for youth and seeks to find ways in joining

them on their journeys in pursuit of healing. Her strengths include the ability to bear witness to the experience of others, facilitate containment of others, and collaborate with others in the exploration of their strengths.

YESS has made trauma-informed care a focus in all programs. Can you speak to how this has impacted the youth experience at YESS, and how this focus has evolved in the years that you have worked at YESS?

Trauma-informed practice speaks to the integration and understanding of past and current experiences of trauma into all aspects of the work we do for the populations that we serve. Our staff at YESS receive trauma-informed care training and are therefore aware of the high prevalence of trauma in our society and the wide range of responses, effects, and adaptations that people make to cope with their trauma. As we continue to mediate these experiences of our youth through our relationship-building, creating connections, and facilitating healthy attachments, there continues to be a rise in youth safety levels, as is demonstrated in increased access our services, ease in inhabiting our spaces, and opening up and connecting with staff.



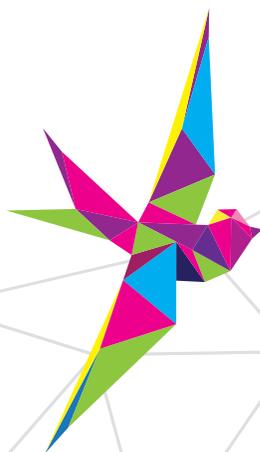
How does access to therapy and trauma-informed support impact youth in their current circumstances as well as into their futures?

Therapy sessions utilise a strength-based approach, helping youth discover their authentic selves, their abilities, and resources, and employ them to build and improve their coping strategies so they can better respond to cues and emotions associated with traumatic events. Therapy also provides an opportunity for youth to explore their thoughts, feelings, and patterns of behavior, and learn new coping techniques to better manage the daily stressors and symptoms they experience. Some of these skills include

relaxation strategies, self-regulation, and anxiety management. Trauma-informed support emphasises working collaboratively to deliver optimum services, as well as offering chances for choice in programs, which promote empowerment, and the prospect for healthy attachment. The trauma-informed support we provide at YESS also promotes resiliency building, as we seek to improve the protective factors in the lives of our youth.

How does the ever-widening conversation of mental health affect the youth as well as the community?

The consequences of not addressing adolescent mental health conditions extend to adulthood, impairing both physical and mental health and limiting opportunities to lead fulfilling lives as adults. We are then called upon to be aware of and facilitate the experiences that contribute to good mental health in youth. Factors such as a strong sense of safety in community; high self-esteem, self-efficacy, and positive sense of self-worth; and connection to spiritual or cultural beliefs, goals, or dreams provide meaning and purpose youths' lives.



INTO THE FUTURE

An Interview with Tessa Mulcair, Manager of Shelters

Tessa has been involved in the humanities field for 22 years. Her passion is to help high risk youth reach their goals by helping them navigate around the barriers in their lives and build essential life skills. This passion is what brought her to work for Youth Empowerment & Support Services, where she serves as Manager of the Shelter Programs, including the Nexus 24/7 sleep shelter, the Armoury

Resource Centre, and the Cohort Independent Living Program. Tessa believes that collaboration is key to ending systemic homelessness across the city. Tessa received the Commonwealth Gold Medal Award from Canada's Lieutenant General for her work with the Youth Restorative Action Project.

Over the past 18 months, there have been many adjustments and innovations made in YESS programs. Even looking back to pre-pandemic times, why is it important for youth-serving agencies to be flexible and open to change?

Adaptability has always been an important part of our frontline services. The youth themselves are constantly changing, and as some move on and new youth move in, this creates a shift in both trends and needs which are both influenced by a lot of factors. One year we might be seeing a big push for gang recruitment in the area and we need to pivot our efforts towards a safety and risk-focused programming in mind, another year we might see a spike in interest for going back to school and we pivot towards a stability focus that will drive success there.

The pandemic for us wasn't an exception to this, but it is a perfect example of what flexibility really means for us. When the pandemic first hit, one of the most urgent issues was that individuals experiencing homelessness suddenly had fewer places to physically be, in the middle of winter. Malls were closed, libraires were closed, all of the safe spaces to loiter simply weren't accessible anymore. We knew that we immediately needed to modify our operating hours to be 24/7 between our day and night programs so that youth had a space to just exist safely. We also anticipated that there would be many new youth coming through our doors for the first time, with the closures of schools and many people losing jobs. High stress + nowhere to escape to =



a breaking point in some households that were already struggling. This is exactly what we saw, a spike in new clients who very likely would never have been in our service if the pandemic had not caused this tipping point to happen. In other words, a spike in clients who were very much not prepared for life on the streets. The population shifts, external risks shift, community supports shift... it's a fluid environment and we need to remain fluid in order to provide the best version of support for the youth who need us today.

How do youth-serving agencies impact not just youth's futures, but also the future of the wider community?

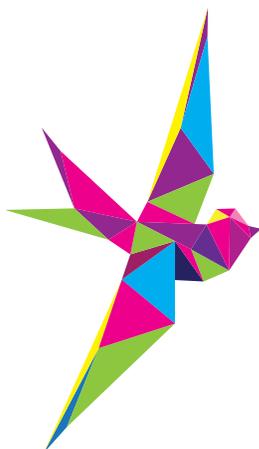
A single youth does not exist in a bubble, they have family and friends, they go to school and have jobs, they pass by and interact with many people—just like we all do. They are a part of our community. Pain and suffering are not siloed, when any member of our society struggles it affects us all. Sometimes this is in very direct ways, like when someone who is struggling with severe addictions becomes desperate enough

to rob a stranger. Sometimes it's in more subtle ways, like the high cost of emergency physical and mental health interventions for people experiencing homelessness, and this affects the public budgets which we all pay for. What if we can prevent the residual trauma of events like that community member being robbed by having addictions programs ready and available? What if we can prevent the enormous cost of emergency services for homeless individuals by spending far less money on meaningful prevention and interruption of homelessness?

If we help meet the needs of our most vulnerable, then we lift the entire community at the same time.

Based on the changes you have seen in the youth sector during your career, in what ways do you think this work will continue to evolve, either in the broader sector or specifically at YESS?

I hope to see the sector as a whole pulling away from methods that institutionalize youth. We need more services that directly aim to end chronic underlying issues that cause cyclical homelessness. We can't simply have shelters and independent housing—we need to focus on the transitional programs that fit in-between those two points. Programs that build life skills, that offer support rather than coddling, that guide rather than control, programs that create an environment where autonomy and self-reliance can grow and thrive, programs that promote healthy integration into community.



YESS is a proud partner of the United Way!
Do Local Good at myunitedway.ca



United Way
Alberta Capital Region



Portrait Artwork by Jonathan Busch